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Constructing ‘hydraulic’ Society¹ in Lower Chenab Colony: A Case Study of Toba Tek Singh (1900-1947)

Abstract

This paper focuses on agricultural colonization projects from 1885 to 1947 in Punjab. It will be helpful to understand agricultural colonization of the Punjab by the British government and further to establish a link with migration trends during the partition of Punjab in 1947. Among other canal colonies areas, Lower Chenab Colony greatly transformed the agricultural economy of the Punjab. The case study research material has been primarily drawn from the District Colony Record Office Toba Tek Singh, Punjab Archives Lahore and the British Library. It shows that social engineering through which British government developed Toba Tek Singh, constructed a hydraulic society, controlled by the colonial state through the control of canal waters. Its specific composition also gives clue to the migration trends during the Partition of Punjab in 1947. The local non-Muslims’ (Hindu and Sikh) previous family links with the East Punjab became one of the major factors in their migration to India.

Key Words: Hydraulic society, Toba Tek Singh, Social engineering, migration, Lower Chenab colony

Introduction

History of the canal colonies in the Punjab during colonial period had been researched by the number of historians from different aspects of this project. David Gilmartin analyzed the Punjabi migration to the Canal Colonies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and provided a critical link ‘between village organization and state power that lay at the heart of colonial rule’.² D. S. Tatla found the roots of rural Punjabi migration to the annexation of Punjab which further contributed by two factors of ‘concept of martial races’ and ‘canal irrigation project in bars’.³ Imran Ali argued that agricultural colonization in the canal colonies in Punjab by the British government distorted the development and explained ‘how one isolated sub-economy, that of the Punjab, could have experienced significant growth and yet have remained backward’.⁴ Malcolm Darling also highlighted this aspect of canal economy and concluded as ‘the bulk of the cultivators of the Punjab are born in debt, live in debt, and die in debt’.⁵ The material prosperity of the canal colonies, he remarked, ‘owes more to good fortune

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than to effort, more to high price than to skill, and more to the labours of the canal engineer and the colonization staff than to his own industry and thrift'.⁶ In history of the Canal Colonies in Punjab, Tahir Mahmood has given a new approach to the politics of collaboration and military recruitment during colonial period by taking District Shahpur as case study. He has proved that collaboration was 'a dynamic two-way process, rather than, as it is often portrayed, a top down, one way relationship'.⁷ In response to the earlier emergence of communalism in urban areas of the canal colonies as compared to the rural areas he maintained 'in the market towns of the (Jhelum canal) colony, Hindu benefited the most from the new economic opportunities and given their wealth and education they better equipped to establish their majority in the urban representative institutions'.⁸ Mridula Mukherjee also criticized the policies of agricultural colonization of British government during colonial period through examining 'the impact of colonialism on the agrarian economy as whole and, on the agrarian class structure in particular'.⁹ She maintained that the investment in agriculture development in Punjab was hampered because 'the vast majority of cultivators were unable – because of their insufficient holdings, the pressures of state taxes, rents and debt, the nature of commercialization, lack of credit, low productivity levels and the like—to generate a surplus for investment'.¹⁰ In addition to this P. Virdee argued in her research that 'localised patterns of political authority and culture impacted on the differential experience of partition related migration'.¹¹ All these historians researched canal colony areas of Punjab through different aspects but locality based case studies approach from establishment of canal water dependent society to the emergence of specific communal composition, and further its links with migration patterns in 1947 is generally avoided. This article will try to cover this research gap by taking Toba Tek Singh as case study.

Origin and Development of Lower Chenab Colony

The Lower Chenab Colony covered most part of the government waste lands known as Sandal *bar* in Rechna Doab between the rivers Ravi and Chenab.¹² It was figured out as a district by the British government for census purpose in 1901 and comprised whole or parts of the tehsils of three districts, Jhang, Lahore and Gujranwala.¹³ Construction of the Lower Chenab Canal for colonization and cultivation in Sandal *bar* was considered as a cornerstone in the history of agricultural colonization in the Punjab. It transformed the whole *bar* from an arid region inhabited by nomadic pastoral tribes to what came to be viewed as a progressive, modern 'the richest and most flourishing district of the Punjab'.¹⁴

The origin and development of Lyallpur, as a capital of the Lower Chenab colony, was considered as a 'miracle' during the start of twentieth century because of its profound success in such a short span of time.¹⁵ Lands grants in the Chenab colony had been granted from 1892-1902 and 1926-1930. It was the most expensive and the largest canal colony project, constructed in two stages. It was a lucrative project, not only for the British colonizers but also for the grantees because of its economic prosperity which was outcome of vast agriculture production. The main Chenab canal with its three great subdivisions, the Rakh, Jhang and Gugera branches, transformed the vast track in Lyallpur and Toba Tek Singh from a *bar* to a settled cultivatable region during British rule.

Allotment in the Lower Chenab Colony was started in 1892,¹⁶ when 230,761 acres on all three branches of Chenab Canal (Rakh, Jhang, Gugera) were granted. In 1903, this total grant raised to 1,813,501 acres, which shows the rapid progress of this project. Old traditional living settlements, *rahna or jhok* of the *bar* were replaced with more systematic *chak* system with numbers, for getting better results and easier calculation, from 1874 to 1884.¹⁷

Major objectives and Selection of Grantees for Lower Chenab Colony

Philanthropic spirit, the relief of congested districts of central Punjab, the introduction of practical agricultural society having best agriculturist communities, the need of mares and camels for breeding for military purposes, and the 'growth of selected seeds'¹⁸ were some major motives behind establishment of the Lower Chenab Colony.¹⁹ Some administrative and political issues were also played important role for the establishment of the lower Chenab colony. After Punjab's annexation, *doabs* areas and the resident nomadic tribes were considered as potential threat to the government. Hence, 'these doabs visualized as the haunts of thieves and plunderers' by the British government 'posed for them an element of political instability and potential danger'.²⁰ Similarly, 'the nomadic and pastoral tribes inhabiting the doabs were looked on with suspicion and disfavor'.²¹ Another important factor was 'settlement of the disbanded Sikh army' which was considered as major reason for construction of the Upper Bari Doab Canal.²²

The grantees for the project of Lower Chenab Colony were taken from seven districts: Ambala, Ludhiana, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Sialkot. Most of these areas were Sikh populated and 'two hundred and fifty thousand acres of land in the Rechna Doab of the Lower Chenab Canal Colony alone was allotted to Sikh agriculturalists from the Amritsar District'.²³ Huge land grants were allotted to these settlers across newly constructed watercourses linked the Rakh, Jhang and Gugera branches which placed Lyallpur district in less than fifty years among the top populated districts of the Punjab.²⁴ Lower Chenab Colony was the largest Canal Colony project, having three major types of grants, peasants (*abadkar*), yeoman (*sufedposh*) and capitalist (*rais*).²⁵

As per the government policy for portraying Punjab as a country of peasants and to appease the 'dominant peasant castes of rural Punjab', 78.3 percent of land (1,428,680 acres) in Chenab colony had been granted to the small peasants,²⁶ These peasants were of three kinds 'Immigrants' (taken from central Punjab Districts Ambala, Ludhiana, Jullundur, Amritsar, Gujrat, Lahore, Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur and Sialkot, which had the best agricultural traditions); 'Nomads' (*janglis*), the cattle grazers of the Bar, selected by Colonization officers after checking their record from local oral sources; and 'Hithari', the old landlords of the region.²⁷

According to the 1891 Census, the total population of the Lower Chenab Colony was 112,286.²⁸ In 1911, the population increased to 1,105,997 including 548,207 immigrants, born outside the colony. In 1941, Lyallpur was the developed centre of the Colony, stretched on 3522 sq miles with seven market towns²⁹ and a population of 1,396,305. It was essentially a modern agriculture based economy with 1,269,978 rural populations in 1941. It had 2215.37 percent variation in population from 1891 to 1941, which was the highest in all districts of the Punjab.

The total population of Lyallpur town was 69,930, which comprised majorities of Hindus or Sikhs (Hindu 47%, Sikh 16%, Muslim 33%, and Christian 4%).³⁰

Credit for the success of the colony went to ‘the sturdy peasants of Amritsar, Jullundur, Gurdaspur and Ludhiana, who have settled down in increasing numbers as permanent residents of the Colony, and palm for successful and efficient colonization must rest with them’.³¹ The role of the ‘aboriginal communities’, the *jangli* nomadic tribes were also very important in the *bar* colonization. Initially, they were against the colonization process³² and tried to create hurdles for the migrated grantees. But with the passage of time, they settled down in the *bar* along the other migrant grantees.³³

Immigrants were 64.6 percent of whole of the Lower Chenab Colony population. Hindu Jats were 79,657, among whom the majority was Sikh (60,518). They were allotted 448,565 acres, 23.67 percent of the total land granted in different capacities of peasants, capitalists, yeomen, special rewards and auction purchasers.

Lower Chenab Colony: Economic prosperity

The Lower Chenab Colony was thus transformed from a wasteland to a prosperous agriculturist society due its canal projects and thanks to the efforts of its cultivators. It was not an easy task to bring under cultivation so many million acres of arid land.³⁴ Canal colony-based agriculture growth boosted the state income and it benefited all the classes associated with it. Commenting on the general prosperity, Malcolm Darling narrated his personal experience as:

‘In 1923 I visited the prosperity of one of them near Lyallpur. The owner, a Sikh, had received grant of 150 acres, and a result of many years of sustained hard work, even to the point of occasionally weeding the field himself, and of close personal supervision of his Christian tenants, he had been able to build a large two-storey country house at a cost of Rs. 15,000, and had surrounded it with a sixteen acre garden. (He) was the first agriculturist to have a telephone in his house’.³⁵

Though it was not so with all the grantees but it was quite impressive progress in a locality where thirty years previously there had been nothing except for nomads roaming in the *bar*.

Agricultural Colonization in Toba Tek Singh

Toba Tek Singh is an important town of the Chenab Colony in west Punjab. It was among the other major towns (Lyallpur, Gojra, Chiniot, Sangla) of this Colony, which acquired importance for agricultural export markets. Its importance was further enhanced because of its link with North-Western Railways’ Wazirabad-Khanewal Branch. Toba Tek Singh (Literal meaning, The pond of *Tek Singh*, a Sikh saint) was a small locality on the road between Jhang and Chichwatni established during the nineteenth century. It was established as a town in Jhang Branch Circle II (A revenue assessment circle of Lower Chenab Colony) in 1900, one year after its link with the railway in 1899.³⁶ It had also been allotted *Chak* number 326 JB (Jhang Branch) during the colonization process. Toba Tek Singh and Gojra (then town and now Tehsil of Toba Tek Singh) emerged as

important market towns in this region. Colonization and migration led to the socio-economic transformation of the whole tract, from Lyallpur to Shorkot and from Jhang to Kamalia.³⁷

Toba Tek Singh was irrigated by the Lower Chenab Canal System, which was the second largest canal system with a length of 471 miles (main line) and an average area irrigated annually of 2,530,000 acres. It was started in 1884-1890 and completed in 1899-90. Its water was controlled through the Khanki Headworks, the oldest head works of its kind, constructed in 1889 on the River Chenab. Toba Tek Singh as a tehsil of Lyallpur had scanty rainfall (average rainfall in Toba Tek Singh from 1901 to 1909 was 9.14 inches). Hence, ninety-nine percent was dependent on this canal irrigation.³⁸ This indicates the importance and meanings of the canals water for Toba Tek Singh. Its migrant peasant society, together with its agriculture-based economy dependent on the water of the Lower Chenab Canal, controlled by the state, made it truly a *hydraulic* society. Located at the tail end of the Canal also enhanced the importance of canal water for the locality.

The agriculture colonization process in this area started in 1896 and within two years the majority of the land had been allotted to the grantees.³⁹ 375 Colony Villages, wholly on Jhang and Gugera Branches of Lower Chenab Colony were allotted between 1896 and 1915. The majority area comprised land from Jhang Branch Circle II and Gugera Brach Circle II with 98 and 96 villages respectively.⁴⁰ In 1906-07, the total area of tehsil Toba Tek Singh including forests was 556,754 acres, while 443,441 acres was granted for cultivation, slightly less to the tehsil of Lyallpur. At the end of 1911, the areas from where majority of the grantees had been selected were Hoshiapur (13,923), Jullandher (18,066), Ludhana (8,720), Amritsar (18,326), Gurdaspur (9,734), Sialkot (18,829), and Jhang (13,699). Other than these, grantees from Ferozpur, Lahore, Montgomery, Jhelum, Gujrat, and Gujranwala were also successful in consolidating considerable land grants in Toba Tek Singh.

In most cases, the colonization officer accommodated grantees from the same locality in the same village. Though all villages were allotted a number they were also known by the grantees' previous identities. In Toba Tek Singh most of grantees were accompanied by their families for their permanent settlement but their association with their previous home town was reflected in their living style and day-to-day affairs.

Table: Assessment circles, showing total and allotted and cultivated area

Sr.	Circle.	Total Area.	Allotted area	Cultivated Area	Assessing officer

1	Jhang Circle I	Branch,	258429	205526	194800	Mr. G.F.de Montmorency
2	Jhang Circle II	Branch,	353658	253146	241249	Captain M.L. Ferrar
3	Jhang Circle III	Branch,	464638	370773	364657	Captain M.L. Ferrar
4	Gugera Circle I	Branch,	440456	327824	318851	Captain M.L. Ferrar
5	Gugera Circle II	Branch,	597940	457024	436748	Captain M.L. Ferrar
6	Rakh Branch		200443	128026	115612	Mr. B.H. Dobson
7	Extention-Bahlak, Bhangu, Nahra, Nupewala, Dangali, Killianwala		81464	81464	38203	Mr. B.H. Dobson
8	Proprietary Villages					Mr. B.H. Dobson
	Whole Colony		2,539,778	1,906,209	1,786,256	

Source: Final Report on the Chenab Colony Settlement by B.H. Dobson, 1915, p.2

By 1911, the total population of Toba Tek Singh was 194,911, with 3,009 urban populations. Hindus and Sikh formed a majority in urban areas, controlling markets and trade. Toba Tek Singh Town had four factories, all were owned by non-Muslims. In 1911 Gojra Town had 5,417 inhabitants, out of which 2,385 were Hindus, 715 were Sikhs, 2,052 were Muslims and 265 were Christians. A considerable portion of the Muslim population had consisted of *jangli* nomadic tribes. They were largely ignored during the allotment process. They did not fit into their policy of colonization adopted by the British Government towards this colony. Most of the time, they worked as tenants for the migrant grantees. The economy of Toba Tek Singh at the time of the partition, therefore, was controlled by migrant grantees, who had settled in this locality about fifty years earlier.

According to the census of 1941, the urban population of Toba Tek Singh was 33,925 as compared to 3,009 in 1911. This rapid increase in population was due to tremendous agricultural growth and emerging commerce activities in the locality. As in rural areas where Sikhs and Hindus controlled the agriculture sector, so too in urban areas did non-Muslims especially Hindus enjoy a more or less complete hold on commerce and trade. In Toba Tek Singh town, Hindus comprised almost 55 percent of the total population. In Toba Tek Singh's Grain Market, not a single shop was held by Muslims. Similarly in Toba Tek Singh tehsil, non-Muslims were in clear majority. According to the 1941 Census of India statistics, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were 57.27%, 34% and 6.67% of the total population respectively. These Hindus and Sikhs still had family links with their hometowns in East Punjab. During the partition of Punjab 1947, these family ties became one of the major factors in their migration to India.

Conclusion

The Lower Chenab Colony was the project through which millions of acres of the *sandal bar* were transformed from arid land to prosperous agriculture tract. There were number of factors behind the colonization of this tract by the British government but the project ultimately benefitted all classes that were associated with it. Grantees belonging to this project were carefully selected from among agriculturist communities belonging to the districts of central Punjab. Land was granted to them at different stages by colonization officers and their teams under well planned colonization scheme. Under this scheme this tract witnessed the arrival of hundreds of thousands of migrant settlers from different districts of Central Punjab. It was their first migration, and so, while they settled themselves completely in the new region they still retained family ties with their previous hometowns.

After a very brief period of initial difficulties, land grants in the Lower Chenab Colony became very productive for the grantees. Whole year supply of water, a planned system of *chak* on three subdivisions of the Lower Chenab Canal, the linking of these colony villages through roads with towns and then these towns through railway with domestic and international markets, were major factors that boosted local economic activities. Though this economic prosperity benefitted the settlers of the colony its effects were also seen in neighboring districts of the Punjab. But this prosperity was totally dependent on canal waters, as the *bar* had very scanty rainfall. Canal waters were completely controlled by the state, which projected Lower Chenab Colony as a *hydraulic* society. Increase in agriculture production led to the emergence of different grain markets in the tract.

Hence the development of Toba Tek Singh - from a small unknown locality of the Sandal *bar* to the status of tehsil and important grain market on North-Western Railway's Wazirabad -Khanewal Branch – represents an important example of the kind of *hydraulic* society established by British government in late nineteenth-century Punjab. There were different forces that shaped the process of agricultural colonization in this region. The dependence of agriculture on canal water, and the control of land and water, ultimately made Toba Tek Singh totally dependent on the will of the state. These factors shaped Toba Tek Singh into a truly *hydraulic* society. Within fifty years or so in the wake of the Partition, the non-Muslim (Hindus and Sikhs) settlers were forced to migrate back to their previous hometowns.

Notes & References

¹ The term Hydraulic Society can be parallel with Hydraulic Civilization. It ‘maintains control over its population by means of controlling the supply of water’. Karl August Wittfogel (1896–1988) a German American historian, coined this term in his book ‘Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power (1957)’

² David Gilmartin, ‘Migration and Modernity: The State, the Punjabi Village, and the Settling of the Canal Colonies’ Ian Talbot & Shinder Thandi, *Peoples on the Move: Punjabi Colonial and Post-Colonial Migration* (Karachi, OUP, 2004), p.3

³ D S Tatla, ‘Rural Roots of the Sikh Diaspora’, Ian Talbot & Shinder Thandi, *Peoples on the Move: Punjabi Colonial and Post-Colonial Migration* (Karachi, OUP, 2004), p.47

⁴ Imran Ali, *The Punjab Under Imperialism 1885-1947* (New Delhi: OUP, 1989) p. vii

⁵ Malcolm Darling, *The Punjab Peasants: In prosperity and Debt* (Lahore, Nafees Printers, 1947) p. 246

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Tahir Mahmood, ‘Collaboration and British Military Recruitment: Fresh Perspective from colonial Punjab, 1914-1918’, *Modern Asian Studies* 50, 5 (2016), pp. 1474-1500.

⁸ Tahir Mahmood, ‘Communal Life in the Market Towns of Jhelum Canal Colony’, *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, Vol. XXXV, No. 2 (2014), pp. 1-24

⁹ Mridula Mukherjee, *Colonizing Agriculture: The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism* (New Delhi, Sage Publication, 2005), P. xiii

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 169

¹¹ P. Virdee, *Partition and Locality: Case Studies of the Impact of Partition and Its Aftermath in the Punjab Region 1947-1961*, Unpublished Thesis, Coventry University, December 2004

¹² On north-east side some portion of Khangah Dogran, Tehsil of District Gujranwala, was covered by the Chenab Colony. For detail see Gazetteer of the Chenab Colony, p.1; See also Imperial Gazetteer of India, The Clarendon Press, Oxford 1908, v. 10, p. 187. Chenab Colony originally formed part of the Sandal Bar that is the lower half of the Rechna Doab, a name compounded of the words Ravi and Chenab, the two rivers bounded it.

¹³ The Chenab Colony comprised of eight Tehsils, Lyallpur, Toba Tek Singh, Samundari, Chiniot, Jhang (Jhang District), Khangah Dogran, Hafizabad (Gujranwala District), Sharakpur (Lahore District); In Census of India 1901 Jhang District was excluded from the Colony area.

¹⁴ Remarks by H. D. Craik, Revenue Secretary to Government, Punjab and Its Dependencies, on Final Report on the Chenab Colony Settlement, 1915

¹⁵ Kapur Singh Bajwa, *A Study of the Economic Effects of the Punjab Canal Colonies* (unpublished thesis) University of Leeds, 1925

¹⁶ Real work of colonization started in February 1892. Mr. M E D Maclagan was appointed as Colonization Officer in 1890 some allotments had made, near Khangah Dogran, irrigated by Inundation canal. See Gazetteer of the Chenab Colony, P. 29

¹⁷ Chenab Colony Gazetteer, p.4-5 & 18-19

¹⁸ Edmund Candler, *The Work at Lyallpur* (Lahore, The Superintendent Govt. Printing, Punjab, 1920)

¹⁹ Malcolm Darling, *The Punjab Peasants*, p.116; see also Chenab Colony Gazetteer, p.29

²⁰ Fareeha Zafar, *The Impact of Canal Construction on the Rural Structures Of the Punjab: The Canal Colony Districts 1880 to 1940*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1981, p. 20

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid; See also, Rajit K. Mazumder, *The Making of Punjab: Colonial Power, The Indian Army and Recruited Peasants, 1849-1939*, PhD Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2001, p. 96

²³ Ian Talbot & Shinder Thandi, *Peoples on the Moves*, p.xv

²⁴ Census of India 1881 and 1941, Table: Punjab Canal Colony Districts, Density of Population, 1881 and 1941 (p.s.m)

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ For details Rajit K. Mazumder, *The Making of Punjab*, P.95; Malcolm Darling, *The Punjab Peasants*, p.117

²⁷ Final Report on the Chenab Colony Settlement, p.5

²⁸ Exact figure is not possible as the Sandal bar was comprised of the area from four districts and separate census record of the Bar was not existed. In 1901 Jhang areas were excluded from the Lower Chenab Colony.

²⁹ Lyallpur, Chak Jhumra, Tandlianwala, Jaranwala, Toba Tek Singh, Gojra, Kamalia

³⁰ Census of India 1941, Volume VI, Punjab,

³¹ Kapur Singh Bajwa, *A Study of the Economic Effects of the Punjab Canal Colonies*, p.35

³² They were reluctant for the land grants, as depicted in a Punjabi ballad.

All the Janglis requested with folded hands,

Hang Us but never give us lands, cited in Kapur Singh Bajwa, *A Study of the Economic Effects of the Punjab Canal Colonies*, p.35

³³ Final Report on the Chenab Colony Settlement, pp.34,35; See also Kapur Singh Bajwa, *A Study of the Economic Effects of the Punjab Canal Colonies*

³⁴ Malcolm Darling, *The Punjab Peasants*, pp 114-115

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Gazetteer of the Chenab Colony, op. cit., p 1

³⁷ Final Report on the Chenab Colony Settlement, p.8

³⁸ Punjab District Gazetteers, Lyallpur, Volume xxxi, Statistical Tables 1912, p.13

³⁹ Plan of Assessment Circle Jhang Branch, Revenue and Agriculture Department, 1897, No. 46, Plan of Assessment Circle of Jhang Brnach. File No. 28, Punjab Archives Lahore

⁴⁰ Final Report on the Chenab Colony Settlement, p.8